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AUTHOR	Gittman, Elizabeth; Plumer, Davenport
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ABSTRACT

The undergraduate population at the New York Institute of Technology (NYIT), an open enrollment four-year commuter college, is highly vulnerable to attrition. Fifty-two percent of the students enrolled between July 1, 1991 and July 1, 1995 either did not graduate after 4 years or did not return to school. In response, the college has developed academic, counseling, and administrative approaches to improving retention. Academic approaches include required placement tests and college success classes for all incoming students; an early warning system to contact students who show signs of academic weakness; individualized and group remediation sessions; and off-site classes, convenient scheduling, and interactive video classes to make attending class as easy as possible. Counseling approaches include the availability of professional private counseling services, as well as required exit interviews with counselors for students who request to transfer financial aid to another institution. Finally, the development of an Interdisciplinary Studies major allows students to apply the maximum number of credits to a bachelor's degree, and provides another option for students on academic probation in other programs or those who have not decided what to study. A table showing graduation rates from 1989 to 1994 is attached. (BCY)

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Retention Strategies at an Open Enrollment Commuter College

Elizabeth Gittman and Davenport Plumer
New York Institute of Technology

Abstract: The paper presents attrition data and describes academic, counseling, and administrative approaches to reducing attrition at the college. The authors recommend that further study investigate effectiveness of the various strategies for specific populations.

Paper presented at the 1996 annual meeting of the Northeastern Educational Research Association.

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Retention Strategies at an Open Enrollment Commuter College

Elizabeth Gittman and Davenport Plumer
New York Institute of Technology

New York Institute of Technology (NYIT), an open enrollment commuter college with campuses in Old Westbury, Islip, and Manhattan, has an undergraduate population highly vulnerable to attrition. Between July 1, 1991 through July 1, 1995, 52 percent of all enrolled students across the three campuses had not graduated and were no longer attending NYIT after six years (Table 1). The 52 percent figure reflected attrition data for two full-time populations first-time freshman and transfer students at 69 percent and 30 percent respectively. The lower attrition rate for transfer students may be attributed partly to the fact that many of these students have used the community colleges to lower their costs and were prepared both academically and financially for transfer. (In the way of comparison, the attrition rate for community college students is approximately 65 percent.)

Open enrollment means that the students are likely to have academic trouble especially in programs that have professional accreditation and require a high quality of student work. The problem is compounded by the fact that commuter students generally spend insufficient time on campus to develop affinity for other students, faculty, or the institution.

Although the goal of all retention strategies is to keep students in school long enough to graduate, colleges employ a variety of strategies that work in different ways. Beatty-Guenter (1994) developed a typology of programs that sort, support, connect, and transform students. Students are sorted into homogeneous groups through, for example, program planning or early warning. Students are supported in dealing with life's problems through, for example, child care or financial aid. Students are connected with one another and the institution in a way consistent with Tinto's social integration model (1975) through, for example, peer programs and faculty advisors. And, students - or the college - are transformed through, for example, remediation or policy changes.

Academic Approaches

At NYIT, most retention programs are centered on academic performance. The process begins with the requirement that all incoming first-year college students take placement examinations. Placement examinations are particularly important for students with a weak academic background who want to major in a highly demanding subjects, such as architecture or engineering.

College success seminars are two-credit hour classes required for all incoming freshmen. Designed to address a variety of adjustment and lifestyle issues such as time management, study habits, expectations, and college procedures, the college success seminars are useful, as well in building relationships among the first-year college students who are seminar participants. Effect of the college success seminar on student goal-setting behaviors and academic success is currently being explored (Plunkett, in progress).

Once the semester is underway, other academic support activities come into play. Faculty in all academic areas cooperate with the *early warning system*, a systematic process for assessing students who are not producing a satisfactory level of work or who have excessive absence. Reports of the faculty assessments are processed by the Enrollment Management Office, and students who show signs of academic weakness are contacted.

All NYIT students are welcome to participate in individualized and group remediation sessions provided by college faculty. Moreover, a learning laboratory provides help on class assignments and papers for students who request assistance. Aside from remediation and learning laboratory support services, the Enrollment Management Office sometimes assigns a no-cost peer tutor to students who are who are identified by the Early Warning System. Peer tutors are students who have been recommended by their respective academic departments and who have at least a 3.3 average. It should be noted that even with the most aggressive advisement, NYIT does not compel a student to accept academic support.

Other approaches to improve student retention are designed to make attending classes as easy as possible for employed students. These approaches include availability of off-site classes, convenient scheduling, and ITV (interactive video) courses. Additionally, small classes on-site have potential for developing affiliation among students. Most classes at NYIT are limited to 25 students; many classes are smaller.

In addition to the more institutionalized approaches, individual academic departments use a personal approach to building affiliation through small group meetings on campus and at instructors' homes. In Old Westbury, this approach is personified in the Dean of Students who reaches out to students who may be at risk of failure and may be subject to attrition at the first sign of adversity (typically in the first six weeks of the freshman year). The Dean of Students enlists students to join service organizations and develop the sense of affiliation that would elude their peers who simply come to campus and then return home or to work.

Counseling Approaches

Sometimes, students seek help on their own. All NYIT students are eligible for and welcome to use professional private counseling services arranged by appointment and maintained until adjustment issues are addressed. Counselors review students' schedules to be sure that students have not assumed a too difficult or heavy course load. (The administrative policy that

assesses students a per-semester fee may encourage students to sign up for more credits than they can manage.) Counselors often advise students who are experiencing difficulty to drop courses above the 12-credit minimum.

The Enrollment Management Office invites students who are identified by the Early Warning System to meet individually with counselors. Counselors prefer to become involved with floundering students before the failing grades begin to accumulate. Because most students are not likely to seek help on their own until they are in serious academic trouble, however, the Early Warning System serves a useful function.

Counselors report that lifestyle issues are more likely to be a factor in poor achievement and adjustment than lack of ability. They report, for example, seeing many students with low-grade sleep deprivation who need help managing time and setting priorities. Others with nutritional deficiencies need help in managing their eating patterns.

As a final effort to prevent attrition, students who request to transfer financial aid to another college must provide an exit interview to a counselor. The exit interview exerts pressure on the transferring student, but seldom changes a student's mind. The exit interview is a final, and generally futile, effort to prevent attrition. Nor is the exit interview a very useful data gathering device. Unwilling to talk about their reasons for transferring, most students evade the questions by referring vaguely to personal or to financial problems. Even if financial hardship were a difficulty for some students, it is not so for all as demonstrated by past institutional research that has identified students who leave for more costly institutions.

Administrative Approaches

One administrative solution to the problem of undergraduate attrition is a change in designation of major to Interdisciplinary Studies. Interdisciplinary Studies accommodates NYIT students by allowing them to apply the maximum number of credits to a Bachelor's degree, thereby providing a safety net for students who want to "bail out of" other programs. Generally, students are on academic probation when they begin the Interdisciplinary Studies program because they have ceased to function in the chosen major. When they change their major to Interdisciplinary Studies, internal transfer students can delete unrelated credits. The program appeals particularly to life sciences and architecture students who become "satiated" with a demanding and narrow curriculum. Thus, the "internal transfer students" change their major to Interdisciplinary Studies which requires a 30-credit concentration across a choice of disciplines and allows a wider array of courses for elective credit. In this way, Interdisciplinary Studies provides flexibility by allowing students who have started with another major to spread their credits across the curriculum areas. Interestingly, the use of Interdisciplinary Studies to prevent attrition was not planned when the program was designed.

Interdisciplinary Studies, then, attracts students who might potentially have left the college whether to terminate their postsecondary education or to transfer to another postsecondary institution. Interdisciplinary Studies does not, however, attract students who have already made a decision to transfer to another institution. By the time students have made the request for a financial aid transfer, it is too late to interest them in changing their major.

In 1996, approximately 30 students earned a Bachelors' degree with a major in Interdisciplinary Studies. Currently, 240 students are identified as "IS" majors. Chosen by few entering freshmen as a major, Interdisciplinary Studies is popular with students who transfer from other colleges because it allows the transfer of a maximum number of credits to NYIT. Ninety percent of the transfer students who select Interdisciplinary Studies as a major come from Nassau Community College. Because of articulation agreements with various programs at Nassau Community College, transfer students can apply all their credits to various other majors; yet, many are choosing to major in Interdisciplinary Studies.

The Interdisciplinary Studies Chairpersons become involved with students during freshman semester experience in *College Success Seminar.* The purpose of this outreach is to reach students early and "sell" them on the concept that allows them to graduate with a broad range of courses. The flexibility provided by a major in Interdisciplinary Studies delays the choice of a specialization while giving students more time to consider what they really want to do. Thus, a concentration in Interdisciplinary Studies places a positive value on the statement, "I don't know what I want to do." Although not a career-oriented major, Interdisciplinary Studies provides employers and graduate schools with college graduates.

The Interdisciplinary Studies program is flexible and varied. For example, a senior seminar is taught in different ways: one instructor guides a collaborative, interdisciplinary experience with regular meetings and team or group work; another instructor forgoes classroom meetings, guiding students in individualized research projects.

Strategies to develop Interdisciplinary Studies as a positive program at NYIT, and not merely an administrative convenience, may develop students' affinity (affective dimension) and allegiance (connection to an institution) while linking faculty in institution-wide reform to teach across curricula.

Conclusions

Despite efforts to support student retention through implementation of various strategies designed to help students to complete a four-year college program, student attrition remains a serious problem at this open-admission four-year commuter college. The current strategies of academic support, counseling support, and administrative adjustment all appear to help, although it is not clear whether students consider these support programs to be helpful.

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Tinto (1975) explained attrition as a process related to students' changing commitments and experiences. Interactions between individuals and the social and academic systems of their college modify students' goals and commitments that lead to persistence or dropout. Although the Tinto social integration model explains the attrition process in general, it does not explain the relative importance of particular experiences for specific students (Stage, 1989) and by implication, can not predict which strategies might effect attrition/persistence decisions.

The researchers recommends that several colleges collaboratively explore students' use of various retention strategies available within each institution and relative success associated with each strategy by students with certain sets of characteristics (such as gender, area of concentration, and past experience). Such a comparative approach of use and merit may begin to address concerns raised by Stage (1989). A comparative approach would begin to collect evidence concerning the relative importance of particular experiences for specific students and may suggest strategies more likely to effect attrition/persistence decisions for specific circumstances.

Also recommended is analysis of relationships between certain identified variables that may effect results at individual campuses due to the nature of the unique college climates. NYIT, for example, attracts males due to the excellent reputation of various technical and scientific concentrations such as architecture and engineering. Because there is sufficient evidence to support the propensity of males over females to select and sustain technical and scientific careers, an exploration of attrition and retention may appropriately consider the effects of gender and of area of academic concentration.

Additionally, the researchers recommend that collaborative research collect data concerning the timing of students' decisions to withdraw from postsecondary programs and the relative impact of particular support experiences. By identifying decision points, educators may develop specific strategies to apply at various stages of students' postsecondary experiences so as to positively impact students' attrition/persistence decisions.

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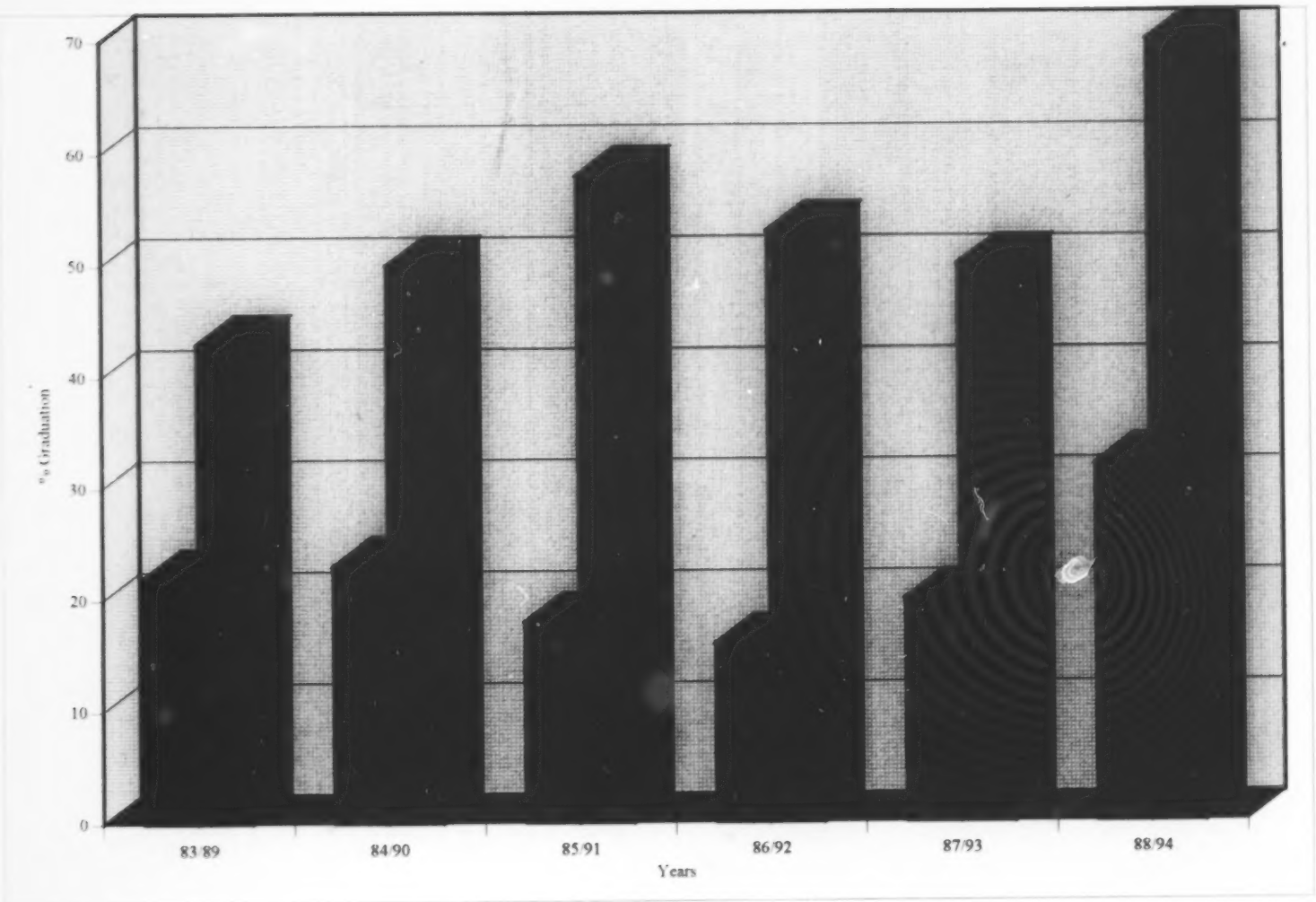
Graduation Rates: 1989 - 1994



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